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STATE DEPT FOR WHA/CCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/21/2016

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SUBJECT: RETALIATION FEARED AFTER MASS FOR GUSTAVO ARCOS

REF: HAVANA 16609

Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Cuban pro-democracy activists are weighing the impact of Cardinal Jaime Ortega's controversial mass, celebrated August 17, for Gustavo Arcos, the recently deceased dean of the island's human rights movement. Activists say the GOC is livid over the event and that retaliation against the Church is possible. Some say the Cardinal's conduct showed fear, while others say it showed disinterest. A priest told us August 20 he had heard from the families of two political prisoners that State Security had pressured them not to attend the mass. The "Ladies in White," six of whom attended, have rejected a proposal from dissident doctor Darsi Ferrer (protect) to draft a joint statement calling for the release of political prisoners. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Martha Beatriz Roque of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society expressed satisfaction August 21 over the August 17 mass (reftel) for Gustavo Arcos at a Havana church. She described Cardinal Ortega as clearly afraid; "You could hear it in his voice; he wasn't speaking in a firm manner." Roque said the GOC is enraged over the mass, adding, "They're going to do something in response, maybe deny permission for a religious procession."

"THE MASS WASN'T HIS IDEA"

¶3. (C) Laura Pollan, a leading member of the "Ladies in White" and one of six members of her group to attend the mass, told us August 21 that she could tell from Cardinal Ortega's voice that his heart wasn't in it. "There was no emotion. Also, he stopped short of praying for Gustavo's soul." Pollan said perhaps Ortega's behavior was understandable, given that the mass wasn't his idea. (It was Arcos' widow's idea, pitched to the Cardinal by Roque). On the other hand, Pollan said, the public praying for Fidel Castro's recovery was Ortega's idea. Pollan also expressed surprise over the heavy State Security presence outside the church. "There was probably one agent there for every person inside the church," she said.

STATE SECURITY INTIMIDATION

¶4. (C) Intimidation kept some activists from attending the mass. We learned August 20 from the parish priest at Havana's Corpus Christi church that he had been told by the families of two political prisoners that State Security officers had encouraged them not to attend the Arcos mass. The officers were quoted as saying, "There are already enough people going."

"LADIES" NIX COOPERATION WITH DARSI FERRER

¶5. (C) Pollan told us the Ladies held their monthly tea at her house on August 18 and decided against joining doctor Darsi Ferrer in drafting a statement calling for the release of political prisoners. Pollan explained that the Ladies want to avoid being perceived as political players. She added that Ferrer, who on August 11 called on Cubans to stop cooperating with the regime, was scheduled to visit her house on August 18 but never appeared.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) The August 17 mass for veteran dissident Arcos was significant in its assembling under one roof all the main figures in Cuba's usually-splintered pro-democracy movement. Neither the regime nor the opposition accepts any moral equivalence between Castro and Arcos. Ortega is not a winner as a result, but we're still pleased he did the mass.

PARMLY